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ABSTRACT

Teachers are trained to adjust curriculum and give extra help to students who struggle to learn. However, teachers are not as prepared to deal with students who resist learning yet seem to have the ability to do well in school and apparently choose not to complete assignments or participate in class activities, consequently choosing to earn failing grades. This study begins an investigation of why students refuse to work by interviewing nine high school students nominated by their teachers as evidencing resistance to learning in at least one class. The results reveal that although all of the students in the study were unique, and several idiosyncratic factors seemed to be contributing to their lack of achievement in school, there also seemed to be commonalities that suggest several more general potential causes of student resistance to schooling; many of the students have personal and family issues that interfere with learning, students seem drained by extracurricular activities or jobs, some elements of the school environment increase students resistance to learning, and teachers are a major factor in students learning attitudes. Implications for preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and administrators are discussed. (Contains 71 references.) (GCP)

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"HEARING THEIR VOICES:" PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO EVIDENCE RESISTANCE TO SCHOOLING

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"HEARING THEIR VOICES:" PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO EVIDENCE RESISTANCE TO SCHOOLING

"I feel like everybody can get a good education, but some choose not to. It's not that they can't; it's that they choose not to (because of) their surroundings, some of them fall into the wrong crowd, or they want to do other things. I have cousins that get pregnant, and they feel like 'well, the whole world comes to an end'." (Evelyn)

"Some students just don't like doing work." (Chris)

"I didn't want to do all that, so I just basically, I just sat there the whole time.... It's so boring that I just give up, and I fail." (Jasmin)

"People I know drop out because they get more involved in being out in the streets and doing what everybody else is doing. They just say, 'Forget school.'" (Jamal)

Those statements will sound familiar to educators. Every teacher has encountered students who are resistant, who may be hostile or confrontational, and who often do not want to be in the classroom at all. They are a teacher's worst nightmare. "One resistant learner can ruin your day. Two or three can make you wonder if you chose the right career" (Ganzel, 1988, p. 42).

Teachers are trained to adjust curriculum and give extra help to students who struggle to learn. However, teachers are not as prepared to deal with students who resist learning—who seem to have the ability to do well in school (and who probably understand the material) but apparently *choose* not to complete assignments or participate in class activities and therefore choose to earn failing grades. This situation is often perplexing and frustrating for educators. Why would a student refuse to do work he or she is capable of doing? This study begins an investigation of that question by interviewing nine high-school students nominated by their teachers as evidencing resistance to learning in at least one class.

Background and Purpose

My interest in this topic stems from my experiences as a middle-school and high-school language-arts teacher. Like most educators, I have personally encountered resistant students—students who seem to have the intelligence and ability to achieve in my class but who, for one reason or another, resist my efforts to engage them in classroom activities. Some are students who may not complete a single assignment during the semester but who can (and sometimes do) easily pass any test or quiz the teacher creates. Other students who are unwilling to engage in learning activities do equally poorly on tests, whether from a continuing refusal to engage the assessment task (Johnston, 1992) or from an actual lack of understanding resulting from their resistance. Some actively try to disrupt classroom activities and discussions that the rest of the class is engaged in; others may passively sit in the back of the classroom and sullenly refuse to participate in any form. Researchers and educators have long recognized the existence of these students, and the dilemmas they pose for teachers, administrators, and reformers (e.g., Alpert, 1991).

My interest led to this exploratory study of these fascinating, albeit frustrating, students. I wanted to address the question: What is school like through the eyes of resistant learners? The purpose of this study is to explore and examine the answers to that question through a qualitative approach, using open-ended interviews with the students themselves to create a portrait of resistant learners and their perceptions of school.

Rationale

Humans are born with a desire to learn about their environments (Paiget, 1970; Bandura, 1982). Babies and young children are usually very creative and purposeful—they actively create their own knowledge by persistently trying to predict and control the things around them (Holt, 1964). According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the need to understand is a fundamental need for all humans. After the so-called "deficiency needs" (food, water, shelter, love, safety, acceptance, and self-esteem) are met, then people are motivated to pursue satisfaction of higher-level needs, called "growth needs," that enable humans to develop psychologically (McCown and Roop, 1992). Therefore, students are always learning—sometimes they are learning the official school curriculum; sometimes they are learning their own curriculum. Teaching requires the consent of the learner, and will and free choice play a vital role in learning (Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Kohl, 1991; Kohn, 1993). A teacher cannot force someone to learn effectively or to care about what they are doing. As Gilbert and Robins (1998) suggest, "The reality is that students learn what they want, when they want, and where they want" (p. 10). Students have minds of their own; they are not clay to be molded or rocks to be broken and reshaped. They are people who make choices, "deciding which factors will affect them and whether or not to participate.... Whether teachers, administrators or parents like it or not, students decide whether they will learn. Students decide what they will forget.... Students make choices all the time" (Gilbert and Robins, p. 14).

Since student resistance is one of the most obvious forms of "student choice," it makes sense to ask resistant students themselves how they perceive their experiences in school; what effect they believe their participation, or non-participation, in classes has on their current and future lives; and what they feel would or does motivate their learning in other settings, in or out of school. Yet Erickson and Schultz's (1992) dictum that, in educational research, "rarely is the perspective of the student herself explored" (p. 467) continues to hold true in this area—few studies have been done in this field that focus primarily on resistant students' own reports and explanations.

This project is important because this particular type of student is often misunderstood. Not only have researchers overlooked the students' perspective, but teachers and administrators seldom take the time to probe the reasons a student is being uncooperative in the classroom, which only adds to the student's frustration and alienation (Kulka, Kahle, & Klingel, 1982; Sheets, 1996; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993). This study fills a gap in the literature by presenting a self-portrait of resistant students, how they view themselves and their world in their own words.

Teachers often do not want to hear what resistant learners think about teaching and learning, maybe because they are fearful of what they might hear. As Cuban (1989) said, "The two most popular explanations for low academic achievement locate the problem in the children themselves ('they lack ability, character, or motivation') or their families ('they are poor, lack education, and don't teach their children what is proper and improper in the dominant culture')" instead of considering the role of school culture or the structure of the school (p. 781). While conducting this research study, I had to acknowledge my own subjectivities as a classroom teacher and consciously put aside my "educator persona" in order to hear what the students were saying, not what I expected them to say. I hope that those reading my findings, especially teachers and administrators, will also listen with an open mind and gain a better understanding of students they may encounter in their own classrooms who exhibit many of the same characteristics. I hope that understanding will lead educators to better serve this often frustrating population.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

I began my work on this project with one level of questioning (intervention) and gradually incorporated two other levels—causation and description. As a teacher, I began with a simple question—what can educators do to help resistant students learn and have more favorable attitudes toward schooling? With that question in mind, I conducted a preliminary review of the literature in the field, and I realized that there were many different terms for overlapping phenomena associated with resistant learning—resistance (Walker and Sylwester, 1996; Moore, 1997; Filax, 1997; and Lindquist, 1994), "willed not-learning (Kohl, 1991), nonproducing (Delisle, 1992), disengagement (Kohn, 1993; Natriello, 1984; Ogbu, 1995; and Willis, 1977), and alienation (Kulka, Kahle, and Klingel, 1982; Seldin, 1989; and Calabrese & Poe ,1990). Two other terms are associated with resistance but actually describe a somewhat different set of behaviors. The terms school phobia (Kearney, Eisen, and Silverman 1995) and school refusal (Kearney, 1993; Lee and Miltenberger, 1996; Cooper, 1984; and Wade, 1979) are often used to refer to children and adolescents who avoid school and who have attendance problems. For the purposes of this study, the terms "resistant learner" and "student resistance" are used.

Implied Causes of Student Resistance to Schooling

Those different, overlapping labels imply differing theories of causation and led me to a second level of questioning—what causes student resistance to schooling? A number of possible (and, again, often times overlapping) causes of student resistance have been proposed. These suggested causes seem to fit into categories based on where the lack of achievement originated—within the student and his or her personal life, within the school setting, or within society.

Student-Centered Factors

Desire for Peer Acceptance. All students have a need for affiliations, and peer relationships are often more important to students than academic achievement. Clark (1998), Valverde (1987), and Williams (1987) all found that peer-group identity is a major influence on whether or not students stay in school. Students who dropped out of school are more likely to

have friends who did not value education and who dropped out themselves. In her extensive review of literature, Osterman (2000) found that many studies "come to similar conclusions, finding that students' experience of acceptance is associated with a positive orientation toward school, class work, and teachers. Students who experienced a greater sense of acceptance by peers and teachers were more likely to be interested in and enjoy school" (p. 331).

Feelings of Alienation. Students who are not accepted often feel alienated. Some researchers have proposed that dropping out of school is the result of a slow, steadily developing process of alienation from school (Brady, 1996; Calabrese and Poe,1990; Child, 1996; Clark, 1998; Krogness, 1995; Larson, 1996; Osterman, 2000; Trusty and Dooley-Dickey, 1993; Valverde, 1987; Williams, 1987). Kulka, Kahle, and Klingel (1982) found reciprocal causation between negative attitudes toward school (alienation) and misbehavior in school. Student reactions to school may be both a cause and effect of student misbehavior. "The data imply the existence within our schools of a vicious, self-fueling cycle of alienation and deviance" (p. 273).

Out-of-School Concerns. Students do not leave their personal lives at the door when they walk into a classroom (Clark, 1998; Ganzel, 1998; Gilbert & Robins, 1998; Krogness, 1995; Mahle, 1992; Seldin, 1989). Problems like family violence and parental divorce can be a big distraction and inhibit students' concentration in school.

Failure Avoidance Behaviors. Below-average students may protect themselves against failure by not participating in class because they feel they cannot win in an academic situation (Glasser, 1971; Holt, 1964; Krogness, 1995; Nicholls, 1989; Ponticell, 2001; Raffini, 1986; Williams, 1987). They would rather be seen as "bad" than "stupid."

Self-Concept Issues. Haynes (1990) hypothesizes that a student's concept of his own behavior is the most powerful predictor of the student's general classroom behavior, group participation, and attitude toward authority. If students see themselves negatively—as incorrigible, lacking discipline, or ill-mannered—then they usually behave that way.

School-Centered Factors

School-Culture Issues. School activities might be a factor that requires students to cross an identity boundary they are not willing to cross (Alpert, 1991; Clark, 1998; Dehyle, 1992; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Glasser, 1971; Larson, 1996; Lindquiest, 1994; Kohl, 1991; Ogbu, 1994; and Sheets,1996). Schools also have "cultures of power." Students are compelled to follow someone else's rules, study someone else's curriculum, and submit to someone else's evaluation of their abilities (Delpit, 1988; Kohn, 1993; Willis, 1977). Those without the power—the students—are more aware of the power structures inherent in schools than the teachers, administrators, and others who hold the authority. If the students come from a family that is not part of the "white, middle-class power structure," then the students may not come to school knowing the "rules", and "students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them" (Delpit, 1988, p. 287). Cuban (1989), Erickson and Shultz (1992), and Saunders and Saunders (2001) also note that power relations inherent in the classroom social system and in the curriculum can affect student participation. "Certain classroom structures may be experienced by students as unjust,

and certain contexts of learning may be experienced as demeaning to the self, family, or community" (Erickson & Shultz, 1992, p. 476).

Teacher Effects. The teacher's instructional style and personality can also contribute to a student's resistance to schooling (Child, 1996; Clark, 1998; Ganzel, 1998; Hauschildt & McMahon, 1996; Linton & Pollack, 1978; Ponticell, 2001; Strum, 1980; Wade, 1979). As Ganzel (1998) said, sometimes teachers "are more responsible for learning resistance than they like to admit" (p. 44).

Curriculum-Related Issues. Clark (1998) and Linton and Pollack (1978) both found a repeating theme of dullness and boredom in student comments concerning schooling. As Ganzel (1998) points out, if a student is able to stay two steps ahead of the slowest learners in the class without working, why should she put forth any effort? In his study of working-class counter-school culture in England, Willis (1977) discovered that "the lads" felt that "school was a blank between opportunities for excitement" (p. 38). Gilbert and Robins' (1998) and Linton and Pollack (1978) both give examples of high-school students turning to part-time jobs for more than monetary reasons. The students said work provides "an emotional, social, and intellectual experience that is more real and engaging than school" (Linton and Pollack, 1978, p. 70).

School evaluative processes can also affect student engagement (Natriello, 1984; Raffini, 1986). Holt (1964) says that teachers and schools create students who fail by taking the fun out of learning and putting pressure on the students in the form of grades and peer comparisons. Several studies support Holt's assertion, showing that students who learned material in order to be tested had lower intrinsic motivation for learning and showed less conceptual understanding than students who learned material in order to put it to use (Deci, et al., 1991).

Students also do not want useless knowledge. In her comparative study of African-American dropouts and graduates, Williams (1987) noticed that more of the students who participated in vocational education programs stayed in school and graduated. She interprets this as evidence of a connection between the relevance of school content to the "real world" and the "holding power of the school" (p. 315).

Society-Centered Factors:

Society is a strong influence on students. Students want to be accepted by society and often have a clear perception of what our society values. They realize that having a job and earning money is the quickest path to gaining the material possessions others admire. In his study, Willis (1977) noticed that, to "the lads," work was more important than school and thus they felt a sense of superiority to the teachers, who they felt did not know anything about the real world because they had been in schools or colleges all their lives. Bishop (1989) hypothesizes that while most students realize that there are benefits to staying in school and graduating, they also realize few benefits from working hard while in school because the labor market does not reward workers for high-achievement in high school, and admission to colleges is based more on SAT and ACT scores and extracurricular activities than on high-school grades.

Research Questions

After researching possible causes of resistance, I began to realize that most of the "causes" found in the literature are from the outside looking in at the student. Very few researchers (notable exceptions include Gilbert & Robbins, 1998; and Linton & Pollack, 1978) have delved into the students' perceptions of schooling. Since this study is a beginning, descriptive study to fill in a gap in the existing literature, I realized that needed to step back from the intervention and causation questions and start at the descriptive level—what does the phenomenon of resistance look like from the students' point of view?

My initial research questions included the following:

- *How do these students describe their experiences in school?* How do they perceive the interactions, materials, instruction, and assessment in classes?
- *What perceptions and feelings toward education in general do these students have?* What are the emotions they connect with the school environment? What value(s), if any, do they see in educational activities or attainment?
- *How do these students perceive themselves within versus outside these environments?* Do they feel they are competent and intelligent? What are their perceptions of their abilities in different academic and non-academic areas? What are the priorities in their lives? What is going on in their lives that may be more important or more time-consuming than school? What are their goals for the future? What role(s) does education play in those goals?
- *What do these students suggest should be changed about their classes, or about school in general, to allow them to learn or encourage them to participate?*

Those questions instructed the construction of my study and my interview protocol. Then, after all the interviews were conducted and I began the analysis process, two additional questions emerged:

- *Are these students resistant in all classes, to all activities, or is their non-participation selective*? If so, what can be learned from the variability in their participation?
- *How do students' family members and situations impact their participation or resistance*?

Methodology

Participants

The population I was interested in studying consisted of high-school students who are by most indications capable of learning but who are resisting learning, as evidenced by a low grade point average (2.0 or less on a 4.0 scale). Participants included nine freshmen and sophomore students from a high school near a major Southeastern urban area which serves a high proportion of minority and low-income students. (My choice of school was directed by my literature review, which suggested students from minority cultures might have interesting motives for resisting schooling that might not be present in a suburban or rural setting.) Some students volunteered for the project after I visited a couple of English classes; other students were referred

by teachers as likely candidates for the study, but all nine students were identified as showing resistance to learning through teacher responses to a short questionnaire on student-classroom engagement.

Data Sources

For the students who returned the dual permission forms, I approached all of their teachers and had them fill out the "Teacher Questionnaire". I developed this questionnaire to gain insight into how different teachers perceived the student's behavior in their class. The questionnaire includes 10 statements concerning student activities, such as "This student participates in class discussions" or "This student completes homework and other assignments on time and to teacher specifications." The teachers indicated the student's level of participation by answering "almost never," "seldom," "sometimes," "usually," or "almost always." I also left room for the teacher to write additional comments concerning the student, and many added anecdotes or other information. These data were used as part of my analysis.

My primary sources of data consisted of one or two open-ended interviews with the students conducted at the students' school. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews were used to gain an understanding of the students' conceptions of schooling, various classes and activities, and their own participation therein, as well as their interests outside of school and their goals for the future. These interviews were recorded, completely transcribed, and verified before analysis. All names were replaced by pseudonyms.

In addition to the interviews, each student completed the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Fitts & Warren, 1996). This instrument was administered before the students were interviewed and was used to gain additional insight into the way the students perceive themselves. The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS:2) is a widely used instrument that has acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha of .73 to .93 on subscales) and concurrent validity (Impara & Plake, 1998). It contains 100 self-descriptive statements factored into nine subscales, including behavior self-concept, physical self-concept, moral-ethical self-concept, personal self-concept, social self-concept, and academic/work self-concept. Like the interviews, all TSCS:2 responses and teacher questionnaires were coded with a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

Hyperqual (Padilla, 1991), a qualitative data management program, was used for analysis. In a process similar to Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) constant comparative analysis model, initial categories were drawn from the initial research questions and previous research cited above.

Reliability and Validity Issues

Several measures were taken to ensure that this was a valid and reliable qualitative study. First, I reduced threats to internal validity by recording each interview and using verbatim quotes and detailed accounts in my report (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Wolcott, 1990). Second, I have reported my sampling and analysis methods and included my interview protocol in my report

(Silverman, 2000). Third, I used triangulation to improve the validity of my data (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). I compared the results of the TSCS:2 and the teacher responses on the "Teacher Questionnaire" to the student responses from the interviews. Fourth, I have reported any discrepant cases (Wolcott, 1990) so that my readers may judge the validity and reliability of my data for themselves.

Cross-Case Analysis

How do these students describe their experiences in school? How do they perceive the interactions, materials, instruction, and assessment in classes?

Views of Classroom Participation

The descriptions that the students and the teachers gave of the same classroom were sometimes very different. For example, Damon's math teacher described him as someone who "usually seems bored, seldom participates," but Damon described the same teacher's class as being "fun, and we get our work done at the same time." Evelyn's business law teacher said, "She is not performing much; she is tired and sleepy in class and is very preoccupied with social issues. She only participates in class discussions if I really try to draw her into it. She almost never completes her homework and almost always has trouble with the concepts because the textbook is on a college level." Evelyn, who seems to be able to read on the college level since she said she read Shakespeare's Othello on her own and could give a reasonable plot summary, said business law "is not a bad class" and that she is interested in the subject matter. She seems to be paying more attention in class than the teacher thinks because Evelyn was able to tell me about every topic they covered during the year. Unlike her teacher, she thinks the problem is that the teacher did not explain the information enough and gave too many quizzes and tests. "We'll have to read it ourselves, and then she'll give an evaluation to be sure that we read it." Tamara's math teacher said Tamara seldom participates or completes work. She said Tamara never asks for help and often seems bored. Like Evelyn, Tamara also blames the teacher for her lack of success in math. She said the teacher "stands up there and does all the odd problems, and she just, like, does them over the overhead and doesn't explain anything."

Effects of School Environment

Several of the students do not like the appearance of the school, especially the fact that it has no windows. Chris said it looks like a "bomb shelter," and Jasmin and Matthew both compared it to a "prison." Chris elaborated, "It's so isolated. Not to be funny or anything, but the windows play a big factor because it's almost a psychological thing. It's like if you're here too long, you can feel the tension in the students." He said the prison effect is amplified by the administrators using "a bull horn to yell at you" and "a guy who walks around here with a gun cause he's a cop."

Effects of School Culture

Violence and fighting are big issues at this high school. As Tamara said, the school could be a good place to learn, but "a lot of people won't let it be that way. Because, like I said, all the pregnancies and the weapons that are, that are in the school, fighting.... A lot of people in the school carry razor blades in their mouth and knives in their purse." (One of the students who returned the permission forms in the first language-arts class was expelled from school before I

could interview her. She had cut a male student multiple times with a razor blade she had hidden in her mouth, and the administrators found a box of razor blades in her purse.) Deshawn, Tamara, DeAndra, and Jamal all talked about how "there's a lot of fights that go on." Tamara and Matthew both said they think there should be metal detectors and stiffer punishments for fighting. Tamara said, "I think a lot of people would feel more safe here (if there were) because I don't feel safe at all."

Reactions to School Policies

Several students mentioned that they felt some of the school rules and policies were unnecessarily cumbersome and/or ineffective. In this school, the students have to go to the commons area (the cafeteria) as soon as they get to school. They cannot go to their lockers or to a classroom unless they have special permission.

Evelyn said she does not understand why the administrators restrict where the students can be in the morning. "If it's to keep the problem down, it's not really helping any. Kids are going to be kids, and they are going to find a way around them and do stuff." Another school policy the students objected to is the prohibition against backpacks. DeAndra had attended another high school where "they let you carry your book bag with you, but you had to carry the little mesh, see-through book bags.... I liked that cause you could put all your books, most of the books that you needed for the first couple of periods and then right before lunch you go change the books and go get your lunch and go back to class and then you have all your books for the rest of the day."

The students also seemed to feel that the administrators' "lock-out" procedure was ill-conceived. "Lock out" means that students who are late to class or who are out of class without a pass have to spend the rest of the period in the cafeteria with an administrator. DeAndra said she had "never gotten the tardy table thing" because "how are you going to sit at the table and learn something when you are supposed to be at school? ... You sit and you can't learn nothing." Matthew agreed. "If they want you to score well on these tests, and they want you to make good grades, why do they lock you out of class? Why don't you have the students stand for the class period or write or do extra homework? But don't lock them out of the learning environment because that's just not helping them."

Sensitivity to Inequality

Two of the students, Tamara and Matthew, were very sensitive to and angry about perceived injustices in the school. Tamara, the one white student in the study, says the administrators treat white and black students differently. "I've followed it and watched it happen. Everything dealing with white people here they get so much more punishment than ... if the same situation and a black student went in." She also said that the police officer and the administrators "will stand up anytime for an upperclassman rather than an underclassman." Matthew, an African-American student who had previously attended a private school, said the school is "a big popularity contest. If you're not popular, then you're not going to get anything.... if you're not popular then you're not known and your voice is not heard, which is unfair to people because I think everybody should be treated the same." Matthew also noticed that some organizations get more support than others. For example, the orchestra doesn't "even have our own room," but members of "Men of Distinction," a group sponsored by the principal,

get special treatment. "They gave me ISS for walking out of the guy's class who started yelling and cursing at me. When one of the Men of Distinction men got into a fight, they got nothing. The other guy got sent home for like four days."

Effects of Administrators

Chris, Damon, and DeAndra all said that the principal was instrumental in creating a school climate. Like DeAndra said, schools are "basically the same but then different principals or whatever have their different ways of running things." They all said that the principal was a "positive role model" and that he calls assemblies and challenges the students. Chris said, "If we have a certain percent flunking, he'll like talk to us about that and how we can do better at it." Jasmin said the principal "lets us know that you have to do certain things to become what you want to be. They're not going to hand it to us."

Effects of Teachers' Personalities

The students also spent a significant amount of time explaining how teachers' personalities affect their attitudes and participation in school. As Tamara said, "The teacher helps me a lot. If I don't like the teacher, then I don't like the class." Surprisingly, these students do not want teachers who will let them "get away with stuff" or "slack off." They don't like "too strict" teachers, who, as Chris says, are "always putting you down for simple things; like you get up to throw something away, and then you're in trouble." Matthew echoed Chris' sentiments, saying he tuned out in classes when the teacher's "disciplinary action thing" is "stricter than the learning, meaning they focus more on you being quiet and you not talking and you being still and sitting down" than they did on teaching the lesson.

However, they are very critical of teachers who "don't have control over the class the way they should." Seven of the nine students mentioned teachers who did not have control over their classes. Tamara summed up the importance of teacher control: "I mean a lot of times some teachers don't know how to handle the class, and they just don't teach a lesson that day or skip a lesson, and when it's time to come for testing, you don't learn all the stuff and then you fail tests." Tamara, Deshawn, and Jasmin all described the same biology teacher, who they say "doesn't know how to deal" with student behavior. Deshawn said, "She has a hard time explaining stuff to us because somebody is always interrupting the class. ...They get out of their seat. And then she'll tell them to sit down, and they'll get smart with her. And she just gets mad, and then maybe she'll stop doing what she was doing." Jasmin said she is annoyed by teachers who do not have control because "they're cheating me out of my education."

The students said that they really like and respect a teacher who "pushes us" and "urges us to do our work." Their favorite classes were the ones in which the teacher clearly drew the line between having fun and doing work. DeAndra said in her math class, the teacher will wake everybody up by teasing and joking, then "he'll get serious and everybody knows that he's serious, so we'll start doing our work." Damon said all the good teachers he's had "made us do our work.... They told us what time was it to play and what time it was to get down to doing what we were supposed to do."

These nine students appreciate teachers who care about them as individuals. Jasmin really likes her English teacher because "she's like your mom. She wants to see you do well. She'll

tell you when you're not, what you should do and what you shouldn't do, what you need to stop doing and what you should keep on doing. And that's just wonderful." Jasmin, DeAndra, and Deshawn all recounted instances when a teacher took the time to pull them aside and talk to them about problems they were having at the time. Deshawn said his "best teacher of all time" was the elementary school teacher who "separated me from all the kids and then put me on the side and asked me why I was (being bad)." DeAndra said she started gaining weight in elementary school and felt very self-conscious. She decided that she was not "gonna do nothing. I'm just going to sit here and not going to talk to nobody," but her teacher wouldn't let her withdraw. "She just always talked to me. She didn't care if I was in a bad mood, she would just come over and say, 'you'd better smile in my class.'" That teacher even gave DeAndra her home phone number if she ever needed someone to talk to.

These students say they want teachers who are willing to help them learn, who don't "say it's 3:15 and I've got to get out of here," but "will help a student when they need help." They say they can tell if a teacher "really likes what they are doing" and if "they really want to be here." Evelyn described one of her "really good teachers" as trying to "take you step-by-step. She gives examples. She may sing a little song to go along with it." Evelyn said she has had teachers who did not seem to want to explain concepts to her, even when she asked for help. "They'd get frustrated and stuff, and I don't feel that's right, because if I'm willing to come in here and I'm at least asking, trying to understand, then you could at least go over it with me." Deshawn doesn't like teachers who teach "like everyone in the classroom knows what she's talking about, and most of the time we don't. Only three or four people in the class can understand what she's talking about." He prefers his social studies teacher, who "takes the time to explain stuff to us better than all the other teachers." DeAndra said she's never really liked English as a subject until this year. This teacher is different, she says, because "she makes it more comfortable…if you want to ask a question or something like that, she'll come and she might even talk to you privately when you need more help, and that's why I think I started to like that class." DeAndra also says it is easy to tell that a teacher is dedicated to the students because "even if they have children of their own, they're still coming in early in the morning and staying later in the afternoon just to help you out."

They are very aware and disparaging of teachers who do not know their subjects, who, as Chris said, "will give you something to do, and when you need help, they're completely lost," or those who "don't really teach" but just "give you work and then sit down and go to their computer." Evelyn laughed at her environmental-science class, which she said is "a give-me class that nobody should fail" because "we basically spend the class period talking" while the teacher hides behind her computer. They are also critical of teachers who get "an attitude with people" and are "always mad at somebody or something." They want teachers who "get along with everybody" and "show us they cared about their students." They want teachers who trust them and give them the benefit of a doubt.

Effects of Teachers' Instructional Styles

They also like teachers who "make class fun." However, as Ponticell (2001) found in a similar study of at-risk students, "fun did not necessarily mean that the work of classrooms stopped. Rather, fun supported work. Students appeared to see teachers who had fun with students as respectful of students as people, as interacting with students in the most human of

ways" (p. 13). Tamara spoke glowingly of her social studies teacher, who "knows how to talk to teenagers" and who "laughs" and enjoys his students. DeAndra likes the way her math teacher recognizes that all of his students are tired during sixth period, so he "wakes everybody back up" by joking around. Damon said another way teachers made class "fun" is to "let us have a free day and do whatever if everybody finished their work and stuff."

These students seem to respond best to interactive classes where they do not just have to sit and take notes or do worksheets. Damon seemed to equate "waiting in class for a long time without doing anything" with "listening to the teacher talk." As Jamal said, good teachers "try to teach without losing the interest of students" by doing "hands-on activities." For instance, Chris and Damon enjoy dissecting things in biology. Chris loves to debate in his civics class because "you get to yell." Damon and Evelyn spoke about classes that were "fun and we get our work done at the same time" because they play review games, like math bingo. The students like working in groups and having a chance to teach the class. For instance, DeAndra appreciated the way her Spanish teacher had them review for the final exam by breaking "us into groups. And we each do like a chapter, and then we have to make a lesson plan and a quiz to see how much we know." Jamal and Damon especially expressed a dislike for "waiting in class a long time without doing anything or listening to the teacher talk."

Frustration in School

Frustration with learning difficulties were described by six of the students. Deshawn said his math class was "hard" because "last year, we did a whole lot of different when we was in the eighth grade. ...We did a lot of different stuff from what we are doing now, and I wasn't ready for it." Deshawn also indicated that he has trouble taking tests, which has led to some test anxiety. He said he feels like he understands the material but gets all the answers wrong on the tests. Jamal said math was "pretty cool" in elementary school but when he got to seventh grade and pre-algebra he was confused—"where did all this stuff come from?" Tamara said her social studies project was "really hard" and that she "hasn't even started" on her project yet because she couldn't find any information on Ireland. Evelyn said she used to be "terrible" at math because "the old teachers try to take short cuts, and that can really lose some students" because "when you do it on your own, you won't see where you made the mistake at when you take the short cuts." Jasmin said she "hated" the drafting unit in her technology class because "it was drawing lines and stuff. I hated that. I'm not great at math anyway, and he was telling us to draw 4 inches. I didn't want to do all that." Even though Matthew is very intelligent, he also is finding some subjects are difficult. "I really don't like the teachers here cause I don't feel like they're teaching the material right.... It's gotten to the point that where the work is starting to become difficult, and I'm like 'I know this but you're teaching it the hard way.'"

What perceptions and feelings toward education in general do these students have? What are the emotions they connect with the school environment? What value(s), if any, do they see in educational activities or attainment?

Eight of the nine students said they felt education is valuable and gave fairly reasonable explanations for why different subjects are important to learn (Tamara never gave an answer to this question. Instead, she kept talking about what she did not like about the school.). For instance, Chris said math is the "most important subject" because "without math, you don't know

anything. You have to learn how to add and all that." DeAndra said English is especially important because it helps you present yourself to the world in the best way. When "you go into the real world," you need to "know how to use the right words, or writing letters, knowing how to use the right punctuations and things like that." Jamal questioned the value of some of his subjects, but he said other topics, like learning about complex and simple machines in physical science, will be useful in the future.

How do these students perceive themselves within versus outside these environments? Do they feel they are competent and intelligent? What are the priorities in their lives? What are their goals for the future?

Most of the students did not describe themselves as resistant. (Only Jasmin admitted that she found one class "so boring that I just gave up.") None of the students indicated that they planned to drop out of school. In addition, although Jamal was not optimistic about his chances of going to college, all of the students expressed long-term goals involving higher education.

Although teachers may have characterized the students as evidencing resistant behavior on the "Teacher Questionnaire," the students tended to describe the characteristics of the teachers and classes rather than discussing their own actions. For instance, several students said, of different classes, "we don't do anything in there" or "he doesn't really teach." Jasmin said she does not like technology class because "the computers are so outdated." Tamara said she dislikes biology because the teacher does not control the class. "I don't like it because everybody throws paper and spitballs in it, and she doesn't know how to deal with it."

Under-estimations of Academic Difficulties

Several students did say that they were not happy with their grades or were currently having trouble in certain classes. For example, Chris expressed concern that his grades are not "where they need to be." Deshawn thinks he will need to start with a two-year college "cause, like, last semester I had like failed three classes, and I thought that it will mess up my record." However, all of them seemed to underestimate the extent of their academic problems. For example, Tamara admitted that she misses a lot of school but said, "I make up all of my work because I know if I don't, I'll end up failing." That seems to be true in three of her classes, but in the other three, her teachers said she "only participates if she wants to" or she "seldom turns in assignments." Chris estimated that he was "making Bs and Cs, and I think I have like a D, too, so I need to get them up." In actuality, his biology, history, and literature teachers all said he was failing.

Deshawn seemed to epitomize the under-estimation of his academic problems. He told me he had a B average in technology class, but his teacher reported that he seldom does work and "will ask to do something else when the work is too hard, which is often." Deshawn also told me that he would pass all but one class (math) for the spring semester, but most of his teachers indicated that he would fail. For instance, his Biology teacher told me that Deshawn had a 40 average in Biology at the beginning of May. Deshawn also seemed to project some of his behavior onto other students. He told me that in his biology class, "every day somebody doing something to get us in trouble." However, the biology teacher noted that Deshawn disrupts the class more than anybody; she even said he threw dissecting knives at other students.

Deshawn also talked about "some students who should have been held back who were passed on to the ninth grade" but he was quick to add "that wasn't me" although he said he "wasn't ready for ninth grade."

Feelings of Alienation

Four of the students indicated that they feel alone or different, either because they had few friends at the school, felt like they had no one to turn to, or felt like the "odd-man-out." For example, when asked if there was anyone at the school he felt he could go to for help on anything, Deshawn said, "No. I wouldn't, I would just keep it to myself. Try to work it out on my own." Tamara spent a lot of time talking about racial issues, and she seems to feel out of place among students of her own race. She seems to identify more with the African-American students and their culture. At one point, she said, "In the morning, there's this white table. Like all the white people sit there. And then they look at me weird cause I go sit at another table. I like go sit with all my friends, and they're all black. I have no white friends at this school. And people just look at me weird, like 'why don't you have any white friends?'" DeAndra said she only has "like four best friends in this school" and that she doesn't even consider them friends outside of school "because I hang out mostly with my cousins and people that I know from outside of school or whatever." DeAndra also indicated that she is teased because of her big size, which might explain why she does not make friends with her classmates. Matthew also does not seem to have many friends in the school. When describing what he does before school if he cannot go to the ROTC room, he said he would go to the Commons area. "Mainly that's where a bunch of the kids come, and they talk. They just talk and eat breakfast or whatever. I just sit there and wait til the bell rings."

Are these students resistant in all classes, to all activities, or is their non-participation selective?

As Lindquist (1994) says, resistance is a slippery concept. All of the students, while not participating or performing in some classes, did have at least one class which they enjoyed and in which they achieved, based on both their own and teachers' reports. None of them are resistant to education in general. They seem more likely to be resistant to a particular teacher, a particular subject, or a particular school. For instance, Jasmin did not like her Spanish teacher because the teacher is "too nosey." Deshawn admitted that math is "hard" for him, and therefore, that is not his favorite subject. Matthew "hates" this school because he had to transfer there from a private prep school and has had a hard time adjusting. He indicated that he has had a hard time making friends at his new school and railed against perceived inequalities. He feels that certain clubs and students are given preferential treatment and that everyone else is ignored. Matthew also repeatedly remarked on the ineptitude of the teachers, "who don't know how to teach, in my opinion, and he described a confrontation he had with a geometry teacher, whom he and his parents considered to be "unprofessional." After the confrontation, Matthew said he and his parents "could not get anywhere" with the principal or the counselors, who refused to move him to another teacher's class.

After comparing the students' descriptions of their classes and teachers with the teachers' descriptions of the students' performance, it appears that enjoying a class is a necessary but not sufficient precursor to participating in that class (see examples cited above). Sometimes liking a

class or a teacher translated into increased performance (18 instances); sometimes it did not (16 instances). However, there did seem to be a relationship between disliking a teacher and lack of performance (15 instances). Only two students appeared to be making passing grades in a class that they profess not to enjoy.

How do students' family members and situations impact their participation or resistance?

Family Conflicts

Four of the students described conflicts with their parents. Tamara, the only white participant, said her real father died just two year ago, and she is upset that her stepfather, who she described as being "is a little bit racist," is forcing her to transfer to another school further out in the suburbs. "I don't want to move cause I've been here since kindergarten." Matthew is very unhappy that his parents pulled him out of his private prep school to send him to a lower-income public school. "We had to move. I was really, really hurt.... It's unfair. You can take me out of my karate, but don't take me out of (prep school). But they took me out and made me come here." DeAndra's parents also do not live together, and she said, "my dad, I don't want to talk about him." Jamal took a zero on a social studies project, which involved creating an edible flag or other symbol of a country, because "I didn't get a chance to make the cake cause me and my mom aren't eye-to-eye right now.... I couldn't really find anything in the house that I could use."

Non-Academic Priorities

Some parents seem to send a message that school is not a priority. Tamara's teachers say she has an absence problem, that she "goes right up to the absence limit every semester." Tamara said, "Some parents are just like 'you can stay out,' and if they know about it, then they will let you stay out. That's what kind of parent my mom is." She also said her mother "writes notes" for her absences. Jasmin said she gets conflicting messages regarding priorities from her divorced parents. "I hear two different things, and it's kinda hard sometimes." Her father tells her to "play this, that, and the other and work on your sports" while her mother tries to get her to pay more attention to academics. Many students indicated basic disengagement from school on the part of their parents, saying things like, "She works a lot now," or "She hasn't really ever been up here (at school)."

Home Responsibilities

Others indicated that, because of parents' work schedules, they had to take primary responsibility for their own daily care, and often that of younger siblings. Deshawn said, "After school, I just go home, clean out my room, wash my clothes. Work. Sit down and watch TV or sleep or do my homework." Jasmin said she has to fend for herself in the afternoons and evenings because her mother does not get home until after 6:30. "My dad's up North, so, you know, it's just me and my Mom and her boyfriend's living there right now. But when they come home, they eat dinner by themselves cause I've already eaten." DeAndra is responsible for watching her 12-year-old brother after school because her mother's work schedule often involves nights and evenings. She has to "make sure he does his homework, make sure he reads his books, ... he can't watch a lot of TV cause my mother doesn't really like that, so I do that. I make sure he eats and he washes before he gets ready for bed. (I) cook or whatever." However,

none of the students directly attributed their academic problems to their added responsibilities at home.

Conclusions

All of the students in this study were unique, and several idiosyncratic factors seemed to be contributing to their lack of achievement in school. However, there also seem to be commonalities that suggest several more general potential causes of student resistance to schooling.

First, many of these students have personal and family issues that interfere with learning. Family conflicts, such as Matthew and Tamara's resentment of their parents' decisions to make them transfer schools, can be a big distraction to students. Parental expectations and values concerning school also seem to have a tremendous impact on these students. Tamara's mother seems to be sending a message that school is not a priority when she allows her daughter to stay home from school when she is not sick. Jasmin reported that her father emphasizes athletics over academics, and several students said their parents do not take time to visit the school or get to know their children's teachers. These students' parents seem not only to be too busy to participate in school activities, they also seem too busy to monitor their children's daily activities and ensure that they do their homework. Instead, many of these students are responsible for taking care of themselves and their siblings, including cooking and cleaning.

It is interesting to note that two of the male participants mentioned that they were more motivated by male teachers than female teachers. Hébert and Olenchak (2000) found that mentors can help reverse the pattern of underachievement in gifted male students by supporting the student, nurturing skills and intelligence, and serving as a model for achievement. Mentors may also be important for underachieving minority students in regular-education classes, especially male students who may not have a strong male role-model at home.

Second, students seem to be drained by extracurricular activities or jobs. The jobs may be a necessity to help their families pay for monthly bills, and outside activities might be more rewarding than classroom activities, but both are outside distractions that limit the amount of time students spend concentrating on classwork. Even practicing for a school team takes up a lot of time in the afternoons. As Jasmin said, "When I did have practice, I would go straight to practice after school." She said practice would last from 3:30 until after 6:00 most evenings.

Third, some elements of the school environment are increasing these students' resistance to schooling. They want a caring community environment, but students repeatedly described the school as a "prison" or a "bomb shelter"—a place without windows where a policeman patrols the halls with a gun and the administrators yell at the students using a bull horn. Chris was correct when he described the school environment as having a psychological impact on the students. During my visits to the school, the students seemed tense. My impression was that this school is not a place where academic risk-taking and creativity were encouraged. Instead, it seems to be a school concerned first and foremost with maintaining order. The students are not allowed to carry backpacks for security reasons, and they are penned up in the cafeteria until the first bell rings in the morning. They cannot go to a classroom or to their locker without a special

pass before school starts, and they are herded out of the school building as soon as the dismissal bell rings in the afternoon. Students who are tardy to class are locked out and kept in the cafeteria under the supervision of an administrator for the remainder of the period. Most of the students in this study felt such blanket policies were burdensome and ineffective. Rules are necessary, but when rules subordinate students, students can become resentful and possibly resistant to schooling.

Fourth, teachers are clearly a major factor discussed by these students. Emerick (1992), Howard (2001), and Tan (2001) also found this to be true. In those three studies as well as my own, the students were more likely to achieve in a class that they enjoyed and for teachers that they felt cared about students as individuals and who were willing to talk to students about personal problems and come early or stay late to help students with academic difficulties. They applauded teachers have high expectations for their students' achievement. They did not like teachers who seem to teach just to draw a paycheck, who arrive at school as late as possible and leave school as early as possible. (I can confirm that a number of teachers did not spend much time in their rooms before or after school because I had a difficult time tracking some of them down to fill out the teacher questionnaires.) In my study, the students emphasized that they wanted teachers who are able to control the students in their classes. They felt that teachers who do not have good classroom-management skills "cheat students out of an education." They spoke glowingly of teachers who know their subject matter, enjoy their jobs, and try to make learning a fun, interactive experience. The students' eyes lit up when they talked about such teachers, even though the teachers did not always see that same enthusiasm in the classroom. The students were listening and absorbing information in those classes, even if other factors were interfering with their studying or completing assignments. In other words, enjoyment of the class and respect for the teacher are necessary for achievement to take place, but in and of themselves, those factors are not sufficient to guarantee success.

The students' and teachers' differing descriptions of what is happening in classrooms brings up an interesting question--is what we have been calling resistance actually resistance or is it simply the student's response to what they feel is irresponsible teaching? Ponticell (2001) suggests that "what teachers perceive as a lack of motivation in students may be an incompatibility between students' motivation and classroom learning experiences and interactions." Orange and Horowitz (1999) found a similar phenomenon when they compared the literary task preferences of minority male students to the preferences of those students' teachers. "We studied the apparent causes of the differences. Closer inspection revealed an emergent theme of 'academic standoff' or mutual resistance, in which teachers and students each had perceptions that clearly counterbalanced those of the other. Teachers felt that students did not care, and students felt that teachers did not care" (p. 26). The teachers may be missing the students' interest and abilities because they are focusing on behavioral markers, such as turning in all assignments or sitting quietly in their seats. A follow-up study might use classroom observations in addition to teacher and student issues to help clarify what is really happening in these instructional situations.

In reviewing what these students are looking for in a teacher—the ability to control their students, a caring attitude, a willingness to help, a knowledge of their subject matter, and an

attempt to employ diverse instructional techniques and materials—I realized that what these students are asking for is nothing more or less or different than good, committed teaching.

Implications

What can preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and administrators learn from this preliminary analysis of the perceptions of students who evidence resistance to school? There are many factors that schools cannot control—family problems, out-of-school activities like jobs, etc. Educators need to concentrate on school and classroom factors mentioned here that can contribute to the learning success of "at-risk" students (e.g. Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989), such as giving students caring, creative teachers who want to be there and want to help the students succeed. Teachers should also include authentic and meaningful tasks in the curriculum.

The students in my study had some insightful suggestions to make school a better place to learn. First, they want a pleasant environment to work in, not a prison atmosphere. Five of the students said all schools should have plenty of windows so "you can get some sunlight" and "see outside." They want a clean environment and don't want to "walk into a classroom and see roaches and spider webs."

Second, they want a safe environment. Several suggested stricter rules, more policemen, and metal detectors to "cut down on the violence." That suggestion seems contradictory in light of earlier complaints that the administrators and some teachers are "too strict." The students expect school personnel to prevent fights and ensure that weapons are not brought into the school. However, they do not want teachers and administrators to regulate every student action and create little rules about everything.

Third, earlier I discussed the students' desire for caring teachers, and two of the students had practical policy suggestions for how to get quality teachers and administrators into schools. DeAndra suggested that schools give practical evaluations, not just paper-and-pencil tests to prospective teachers. She said part of the interview should be to put the teacher "in a room with a group of people, with like a class, and you observe them and make sure they're qualified." Chris suggested a similar system for choosing administrators, except he would have a longer trial period where "they'll be watched (often), and after your trust is finally prevailed, then you'll get the job." Finally, two students suggested curriculum changes. Jasmin thinks block scheduling would be helpful. "If you spend two hours in a class, I think that you understand it more than spending 45 minutes." Jamal would like to see schools have special classes to prepare students for standardized tests.

Again, when you look at the ideas these resistant learners had for making schools better places to learn, many of their suggestions are the same as the recommendations being made by educational reformers. This study shows how the students' perceptions can reinforce our understandings of what students need. Students, even the ones most teachers consider resistant and uninvolved, pay close attention to their teachers' actions and attitudes and are sensitive to the school climate. They see things most adults overlook, and their opinions should be heard. What they have to say just might make schools a better place for all students to learn.

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